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Chapter 2

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace in the Context of the United States

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ABSTRACT

Microaggressions are brief, intended or unintended, commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate derogatory, hostile, or negative insults and slights toward people who do not classify within the 'normative' standard. Those who microaggress are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with people who differ from themselves. In the workforce, these interchanges are exacerbated, as issues regarding implicit biases tend to play themselves out in communal settings. In response to this, the discussion of microaggressions in its numerous forms, coupled with its manifestations in the workplace, adds to the growing knowledge base on aversive behavior and its short- and long-term impacts. The authors begin by investigating the residual effects of everyday "isms" on the work productivity and quality of life of those on the receiving end. They conclude with suggestions for institutional-level education, training, and research—specific to organizational settings—in the effort to reduce microaggressions in the professional environment.

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Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

INTRODUCTION

*“More insidious than those moments of outright hostility, ...and maybe more powerful, are the constant, low-level reminders that you’re different. Many of us feel different in some way, but it’s really jarring when one of your differences is obvious at a glance—other people can tell you’re different simply by looking at you. Even when you feel like you belong, other people’s reactions—even stares and offhand remarks—can make you feel that you don’t, startlingly often.” – Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*¹*

Despite their best intentions, many professionals—and leaders—are influenced by a deficit perspective, pervasive in research, theory, training programs, workforce preparation programs, statistical data, and media portrayals of marginalized groups (Ponciano, 2023). Unfortunately, those with this mindset are generally not taught to approach their work and constituents with a positive lens that identifies the extant strengths, skills, and assets contributed by marginalized individuals. Further, these professionals and leaders are likely to be completely unaware of the deficit-based biases and assumptions that influence how they speak, act, and behave during those and other related interactions. Although resilient people who overcome their difficult circumstances can be seen as exceptional, in actuality, members of marginalized groups have the potential to be successful when they are in strength-based environments. In environments of this nature, one’s value is recognized, the concept of success is reimagined, and all are provided with opportunities to succeed. For professionals and leaders who serve in multicultural, pluralistic environments, building collective awareness and highlighting the strengths, skills, and assets of all constituency members mitigates false deficit narratives by focusing on success and increasing inclusivity (Ponciano, 2023).

This chapter, “Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace in the Context of the United States,” seeks to disrupt the implicit deficit-based narrative that remains pervasive in today’s workforce. Reconstructing perceptions of systemically marginalized groups begins with acknowledging the existence of deficit perspectives that continue to threaten forward progress in the workplace. Across various arenas (e.g., research, theory, training programs, workforce preparation programs, statistical data, and media portrayals), marginalized groups continue to work on “countering” false narratives. In the workforce, microaggressive interchanges are exacerbated, as issues regarding implicit biases tend to play themselves out in communal settings. Nevertheless, individuals in marginalized groups have the potential to be successful when they are in strength-based environments that recognize their value. Adding to the growing knowledge base on aversive behavior and its short- and long-term impacts, we begin by investigating the residual effects of everyday “isms” on the productivity, well-being, and quality of life of those on the receiving end. We conclude with suggestions for institutional-level education, training, and research – specific to US-based organizational settings – in the effort to reduce microaggressions in the professional environment.

Microaggressions Writ Large

*“Microaggressions add up. No matter how confident people from marginalized or underrepresented communities feel about their identities, microaggressions create unsafe spaces and make individuals feel like perpetual outsiders.” – Mira Young, Op-Ed Contributor, *The Daily Northwestern*²*

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Chester M. Pierce, psychiatrist and Harvard University Emeritus Professor, is recognized as the originator of the word ‘microaggression’ in 1969. He established this word to describe the dismissals and insults he regularly witnessed non-Black Americans inflicting upon African Americans (Delpit, 2018; Proctor et al., 2018; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2018; Treadwell et al., 2019). According to Pierce et al. (1978), microaggressions refer to the “everyday subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Black people by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against Black people often are innocuous” (p. 66). A decade later, Peggy Davis (1989), Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, defined microaggressions as “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority” (p. 1576). More recently, Solórzano (2020) refers to these acts as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously.

Dr. Mary Rowe, MIT economist, extended the term from there to include similar affronts directed at women, referring to microaggressive acts as “apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be ‘different’” (2008, p. 2). Since then, the word microaggression has expanded even further to encompass the unintentional and unpremeditated degradation of members of any socially marginalized group (Denmark & Paludi, 2018). This expansion includes all groups of people who experience societal exclusion in any form due to their race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), disability, or sexual orientation (to name a few). Derald Wing Sue (2010), psychologist and diversity training specialist, described microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 229).

A microaggression is ‘micro’ in reference to the size of the infraction, compared to a ‘macro’ intentional, illegal hate crime and the perception of the aggressor that it is inoffensive, trivial, and even banal (Wells, 2017). However, such slights are in no way ‘micro’ as their potential impacts on the victims can be lasting, insensitive, and downright hurtful. The ‘aggression’ component has been compared to a misdemeanor-level assault in the literature (Berk, 2017). Like physical assaults, microaggressions can produce stress, fear, and emotional distress and may intimidate or embarrass victims, expose vulnerabilities, and undermine their credibility. Nevertheless, unlike microaggressions, an assault likely also includes intent, intimidation, and/or the fear of physical harm.

Building on these characterizations, more contemporary scholars broadly define microaggressions as subtle insults directed towards a person or people, as a way of putting them down – no matter the intent (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, 2022; Treadwell et al., 2019). Although widely accepted as disparaging, microaggressions remain distinct in their relationship to more deliberate acts of prejudice, such as the use of racial epithets, as perpetrators often intend no offense and, thus, are utterly unaware that they are causing any harm (Davis et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2019). According to Torino et al. (2018), these statements tend to affirm or reaffirm stereotypes³ about the marginalized group or demean them in subtle, understated ways. They further exacerbate the following areas of concern:

- The position of the dominant culture as standard and all else as aberrant or pathological,
- The expression of disapproval of or discomfort with the marginalized group,
- The assumption that all marginalized group members are the same, curtailing the existence of discrimination against the minority group, and

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

- The denial of the perpetrator's bias or minimizing actual conflict between the minoritized group and the dominant culture (Friedlaender, 2018; Torino et al., 2018).

Though denigrating, these stereotypical assumptions, again, are often not intentional in any conscious or even unconscious way, often making it difficult for aggrieved parties to address such acts in real time.

Due to socialization, most people believe that intent to injure is a requisite component of a grievance. In this same vein, when microaggrieved, the motives of the aggressor may be unclear to victims. Such ambiguity about motives places most victims in the following two positions: (1) attempting to suppress one's anger, perpetuating the injuries, and potentially weakening the victim's self-image, or (2) openly protesting regardless of one's intent to harm. Rowe (1977; 1990; 2008) suggests that the latter situation may likely be advantageous for all concerned, primarily if the aggressors respond by recognizing their role as initiators. As is often the case, however, aggressors may react negatively when confronted because they are usually unaware that harm was inflicted. In today's work environment, microaggressions come in numerous shapes and forms and can be hard to identify (see Figure 1) palpably.

Figure 1. Microaggressions⁴



Further, those who microaggress are often unaware of the deficit-based bias that influences how they speak, act, and behave during related interactions. Still, workplaces and the people who lead them cannot tolerate these slights if they intend to establish a workforce, culture, and climate in which every member feels safe.

Microaggressions in the Workplace in the Context of the United States

"Microaggressions erode workplaces one slight at a time." – Mariela Dabbah, Founder & CEO, Red Shoe Movement⁵

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

More and more researchers are examining the materialization of microaggressions in the work environment, analyzing the impacts of environmental culture and climate on the experiences of minoritized people (Kuh & Harper, 2022; Lee & McCabe, 2021; Sissoko & Nadal, 2021). Relatedly, scholars are increasingly applying microaggressions as a theoretical frame in higher education, governance, and public health research. In spite of the growing scholarly attention, the assertion that the organizational culture within institutions is entrenched in a belief system that protects White interests and enables the expression of racial bigotry still rings true (Oseguera et al., 2018; Thomas, 2019). Unfortunately, far too many workplaces and spaces are unprepared to serve an increasingly diverse, pluralistic population.

Workplace culture is powerfully determined by those in positions of leadership and power. Whether intentional or not, microaggressions in the professional setting tend to create climates and cultures over time. The veritable maelstrom of personal insults is bound to generate new aggressors and produce new victims (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, 2022). These occurrences have been increasingly directed at the marginalized, historically underrepresented, and usually, the most vulnerable members of our society. Moreover, these aggressions specifically target those within historically ostracized racial/ethnic, gender, religious, and sexual orientation groups. People of African, Asian, Native American, and Latino descent, women, Jews and Muslims, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ individuals are the most recurrent targets of such attacks (Berk, 2017). At minimum, the ensuing strain created by these interactions will likely yield adverse repercussions.

The backdrop for these attacks in the United States has recently and dramatically changed with the following events:

- The tragic mass murders committed in the US and abroad,
- The White male police brutality killings of African-American youth and men,
- The mean-spirited toxicity and coarse racist and sexist discourse of the 2016 presidential campaign,
- The post-election protests in cities and on school campuses nationwide,
- The post-2016 election spike in the intimidation and harassment of African Americans, Asian Americans, Muslims, girls and women, immigrants, and LGBTQ people, and
- The post-election spike in hate crimes in public institutions and businesses (Berk, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

These and other related occurrences significantly alter both the context and the urgency required to build collective understanding and respond justly to attacks of this nature. As these incidents continue to unfold, we have witnessed (1) a resurgence of the old standard – including backlash for being classified as “other,” and (2) an unveiling of the prevalent standard of what it ‘really’ means to be American (Turner et al., 2022; Wells, 2017).

Racial/Ethnic Microaggressions in the Workplace

“In college, I went through a process where there was a sense of otherness – where White was assumed to be the norm, and if you were not White, then you were ‘other.’” – The Delta Gamma Blog, “The Impacts of Microaggressions: Hearing from Fellow DGs.”⁶

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Across various sectors, research has shown that the nature of racism has shifted from blatant, intentional, and overt – commonly referenced as “old-fashioned racism” – to more understated, subtle manifestations (Kunst et al., 2022; Proctor et al., 2018; Solórzano, 2020). According to Dr. Pierce (1995):

Probably the most grievous of offensive mechanisms spewed at victims of racism and sexism are microaggressions. These are subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. In and of itself, a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence. (p. 281)

Sue and colleagues (2019) referred to microaggressions as ‘the new face of racism,’ asserting that there has been a gradual and widespread societal shift from overt expressions of racism toward more covert and insidious behaviors. Because they tend to be ambiguous, understated, and often unintentional, microaggressions can be interpreted by the offended party as aversive and even downright surreptitious. Consequently, this gradualism from overt to inconspicuous race-laden relations, behaviors, and interactions has led many Americans to incorrectly believe that racism is no longer an issue for non-White Americans.

Relevant to the US-based workplace, Torino et al. (2018) identified three primary and recurring forms in which racial microaggressions tend to appear:

1. As a microassault: explicit racial derogations, verbal/nonverbal, e.g., name-calling, avoidant behavior, purposeful discriminatory actions.
2. As a microinsult: communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity; subtle snubs unknown to the perpetrator; hidden insulting messages to the recipient.
3. As a microinvalidation: communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group. (p. 275)

As separate events, these and other microaggressions may seem harmless enough. Still, the reality is that the cumulative weight of dealing with these – throughout one’s lifetime – can lead to a poor overall quality of life.

Whether the racial incident is a racialized aggression or microaggression, and whether the action is intentional or unintentional, the consequences of these racist incidents are deep and pervasive and should not be ignored. The direct and indirect targets of these incidents receive the message that they are unwanted and unwelcome in the collaborative environment, which can eventually affect their sense of belonging and their success in the workplace (Strayhorn, 2020). Despite the perpetrators’ intent, people from marginalized groups targeted by these incidents hear the message loud and clear: “You have not historically belonged here, nor do you currently belong here” (Thomas, 2019).

Gender Microaggressions in the Workplace

“There were two Black women working in production on the broadcast — myself and another. We both held the lowest-ranking positions on staff. Not uncommon in most predominantly White institutions, most of our White colleagues had trouble keeping our names straight. As a joke, they began to call us We-Dra — short for Whitney and Deidra.” – Whitney Davis, CBS Veteran⁷

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Subtle sexism — often accepted as usual, customary, ‘good-natured,’ or disguised as ‘tradition’ — has replaced much of the blatant sex discrimination of the past; the range of ‘just below the surface’ discriminatory behavior that many women experience continues daily. Yet, there remains a dearth of research regarding this specific topic (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020). Just as racism and ethnic discrimination have become more subtle and covert in a changing US society that admonishes blatant racism, so has the nature of sexism changed (Seidler et al., 2022). While overt and blatant sexism refers to harmful and unfair treatment of women that is intentional, visible, and unambiguous, subtle sexism tends to be concealed, unnoticed, or even overlooked because it is embedded in cultural and societal norms (Lewis, 2018). Though considerable progress has been made in women’s rights since the Nineteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act were passed, both overt sexism and subtle discrimination based on gender remain widespread (Lewis, 2018).

The undercurrents of subtle sexism are intricate and complicated; however, few studies have investigated the full extent of this particular phenomenon. Research suggests that subtle sexism invalidates and dismisses women’s contributions and accomplishments and limits their effectiveness in professional settings (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2019). Furthermore, a recent body of research has identified microaggressions as a phenomenon related to subtle sexism. As with extant studies on sexism, microaggressions have been found to lead to a cascade of complex emotions that can lead to negative mental health ramifications for those on the receiving end of this and related acts of discrimination (Neimann et al., 2021).

Research in this sphere overwhelmingly tends to focus on racial interactions. Only recently, in the United States, have scholars begun examining – large scale – how subtle forms of discrimination may impact other oppressed groups, including women. Illustrating how microaggressions are part and parcel of both unconscious and conscious discrimination against women in the workplace, reports show that women, on average, in the same or similar job roles, earn roughly 70-75% of men’s salaries (Freund et al., 2016). Additionally, people of color and women often:

- Experience the work climate as isolating, alienating, extremely stressful, risky, and invalidating (Turner et al., 2022),
- Are more likely to experience tokenism or being ‘the only one,’ leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Nash & Moore, 2022),
- Lack mentors who possess knowledge of the ‘minority experience’ (Worthington et al., 2020),
- Have their input devalued and considered illegitimate (Foste & Ng, 2021),
- Have their non-normative identities assailed (Hayon, 2020),
- Experience elevated levels of anguish and distress (Misawa & Johnson-Bailey, 2019),
- Are subjected to biased hiring and promotion decisions (Durodoye et al., 2020), and
- Have people regularly question their qualifications, credentials, position, or status (Hayon, 2020).

The instances of overt sexism remain common; however, the less overt forms of sex-based bias and discrimination are even more ubiquitous. Within the workforce, covert and nuanced forms of discrimination must be taken just as seriously. To date, much of the empirical and theoretical literature on the effects of microaggressions focuses on the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., Lee & McCabe, 2021; Sissoko & Nadal, 2021). Yet, greater awareness of the generally deceptive nature of microaggressions in the workplace (Seidler et al., 2022) has drawn scholarly and public attention to the uneven work experiences of women (Johnson et al., 2021; Seidler et al., 2022).

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Other Microaggressions in the Workplace

“Keep in mind that there is no litmus test for microaggressions. What is considered a microaggression will vary by person, situation, level of relationship, delivery tone, history, context, and other factors. Generally speaking, it’s smart to educate yourself on microaggressions, avoid making comments...that are considered common microaggressions, and, most importantly, just talk to peers and make honest attempts to get to know them (and allow them to get to know you).” – Dana Brownlee, Keynote Speaker, Trainer, and Workplace Antiracism Thought Leader⁸

Microaggressive actions, in the form of certain words and phrases, can trigger discrimination for those on the receiving end. Taking time to be intentional with our language is critical to treating each other with due respect. While it is unrealistic to anticipate every cultural minefield that may exist in every language, the point is to be mindful of the origins of common phrases and, further, to change one’s use of these words upon becoming aware that they are problematic. For example, if one person is looking to encourage another, telling that person to “rise to the moment” or to “be brave” are better ways to convey this sentiment than to say, “man up.” It takes work to unlearn and undo the many fraught words and expressions in our cultural lexicon. Nevertheless, most people find that it is not so complicated once they prioritize being overtly more conscious and inclusive.

In addition to racial/ethnic and gender microaggressions in the US-based workplace, Washington (2022) in *Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions at Work*. *Harvard Business Review* provides us with some examples of other types of microaggressions that one may hear within and outside the workplace environment:

Citizenship:

- “Your English is so good – where are your parents from?” signaling that people with English as a second language are generally less capable of speaking English.
- “But where are you really from?” signaling that where someone grew up is not their “true” origin. This microaggression often happens to people who are in ethnic and racial minorities, whom others assume are immigrants.

Class:

- “How did you get into that school?” signaling that someone’s background makes them an anomaly at a prestigious school.
- “You don’t seem like you grew up poor,” signaling that someone from a particular socioeconomic background should look or behave a certain way.

Mental Health:

- “That’s insane” or “That’s crazy,” using terminology related to a mental health condition to describe surprise or astonishment.
- “You don’t seem like you are depressed. Sometimes I get sad, too,” minimizing the experiences of people with mental illness.
- “Don’t mind my OCD!” using the acronym for obsessive-compulsive disorder. Because of this mental health condition, an individual is plagued by obsessive thoughts and fears that can lead to compulsions to describe being organized, diligent, or meticulous.

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Sexuality:

- “That’s so gay” to mean something is bad or undesirable, signaling that being gay is associated with negative and unwanted characteristics.
- “Do you have a wife/husband?” assumes heteronormative culture and behaviors versus more inclusive phrasing such as “Do you have a partner?”

Parental Status:

- “You don’t have kids to pick up, so you can work later, right?” signaling that someone without children does not have a “real” life outside of work.

These and other microaggressions can happen in the work environment during all types of interactions and conversations. They may occur during the hiring process when a stakeholder is evaluating a candidate with a different ethnic or demographic background than their own. A situation may arise during the performance evaluation when someone highlights an employee’s positive or negative aspects. In customer service, for example, it can emerge when someone interacts with patrons who have a different first language than their own. Washington (2022) reminds us that it is vital to become more aware of microaggressions in general; in professional settings, special attention should be placed on, and care taken in, the language we choose to use.

Microaggressions, Writ Large, in the Workplace

*“The everyday slights, insults, and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions cause real psychological harm.” In *Microaggressions: Death by a Thousand Cuts*, Dr. Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University⁹*

While at the moment, a microaggression may feel like a joke or a harmless action to the person committing them, they do leave an imprint and can have a lasting impact on the receiver, especially if these behaviors repeatedly occur over an extended period. The workplace, often a contained and defined environment, is a setting in which microaggressive behaviors can be both frequent and repetitive over a set time (see some examples of microaggressions in the workplace in Figure 2).

Psychologists often compare these aggressions to death by a thousand cuts. Because of the manner of microaggressions, employees do often not report them. Understanding their impact on others is essential to ensure a safe and inclusive company culture. The first step to addressing microaggressions is recognizing when it has occurred and what message it is likely to send. In managing microaggressions in the workplace, stakeholders must think about their actions and words; even with the best of intentions and in the best of circumstances, one must still be mindful, as it is necessary to think about the effects these actions have on others.

Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace in the Context of the United States

“When employees feel safe, they can express themselves and take risks. They become more engaged, and that drives innovation, competitiveness, and financial performance.” – Lorraine Hariton, President & CEO, Catalyst¹¹

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Figure 2. Microaggressions in the workplace¹⁰



Addressing Microaggressions at Work¹²

In the event that a microaggression does happen in the work environment, experts recommend that aggrieved persons give aggressors the benefit of the doubt and assume a positive intention in these situations (Denmark & Paludi, 2018; Strayhorn, 2020). While it might seem odd (or even unfair) to be the bigger person when one feels disrespected, it is vital—particularly at the moment—to remember that most microaggressions are unintentional. Very rarely do individuals intend to discriminate against or cause harm to someone. However, that does not mean that microaggressions always stem from a place of well-intended ignorance, as some are ill-intended. In light of this, Diana Gueits Rivera, Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Cleveland Clinic, says: “lean[s] toward assuming positive intent and then approaching the conversation or situation with curiosity to try to understand why someone said what they did or acted in a manner which made someone else feel invalidated,” (Leaders Magazine, LLC, 2021, p. 1). When inquiring about a microaggression, helpful ways to introduce the conversation include openers such as, “I am really curious and want to better understand why you said what you said/did what you did,” or “I am not sure if you’re aware, but this is how I am receiving what was said/done. Was that your intention?” (Leaders Magazine, LLC, 2021, p. 1). In this respect, people who have delivered microaggressions have often expressed, at the moment, that they did not intend to be offensive.

From there, the conversation can evolve to center around intent versus impact. While it may not have been the initiator’s intention to be hurtful, it does not change the blow of the microaggression. Although doing so is often easier said than done, honest and open dialogue can go a long way in mitigating any harmful or lingering effects. Such conversations also serve as educational moments for microaggressors that will prevent them from unintentionally harming others.

When should you solicit the intervention of an immediate supervisor? If you have had a conversation and a coworker continues being offensive, it is time to bring the matter to a higher-up. At that point in time, it is essential to know that you are dealing with a microassault. Your supervisor, manager, Human Resources Department, or even an Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (*assuming your company/organization has one*) should be able to serve as an arbitrator. This official should then mediate the situation to determine if the action(s) in question was, in fact, discriminatory.

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

What if the person who is delivering microaggressions is a manager? Gueits (Leaders Magazine, LLC, 2021) suggests that if you witness a manager saying something discrediting or notice that the supervisor only offers major opportunities to certain people, you might want to inquire about it. “When it comes to talking to leaders about things that are not positive, people can be apprehensive. To me, a leader rooted in increasing their inclusion capacity, building team cohesiveness, and wanting to see their team succeed would appreciate the honesty of that conversation.” So, you talk to your manager, but nothing seems to change. What do you do now? Gueits says if she were in this position, she would try talking to the manager one more time before going to HR or even turning in that two weeks’ notice. “I would have another conversation with my manager before leaving the organization or talking to HR unless their action was discriminatory,” she advises. “We all have an ethical responsibility to report incidents that involve discrimination when we experience them. But if we’re going to be good stewards of the evolution of ourselves and others, part of that might involve coaching someone who needs it.”

Management’s role in reducing microaggression-inducing behaviors in the workplace. One way to reduce workplace microinvalidations is to acknowledge the contributions of those who might otherwise be dismissed, ignored, or underappreciated. An uncomplicated way to provide affirmation is by simply giving credit to those who are deserving. Actions of this nature show, as a leader, that you hear and value your constituency. Showing allyship means affirming and validating everyone’s contributions in real and meaningful ways.

Know When to Walk Away

The various global events of the last few years have undoubtedly led to tough conversations — and revealed some deep-seated truths. It can be challenging to process if, for example, you thought the people around you were more accepting and inclusive, but you soon learned otherwise. In the event that you witness a shareholder regularly engaging in microaggressive behaviors, Gueits recommends, at some point, removing yourself from the equation altogether:

If they don’t have the same sort of values that you have and believe in, you have to decide if you want them in your life. I know that when I’m around people who are inclusive and have a global mindset, I thrive, and I’m happier. I want people to challenge me. I want people in my life who have different sorts of experiences and skill sets that challenge my thinking in good ways. Not in ways that I believe are detrimental to what I aspire to be. (Leaders Magazine, LLC, 2021, p. 1)

Indeed, deciding to resign from a job is complex and requires thoughtful consideration of one’s financial and family circumstances. However, remaining in what can be a harmful environment for prolonged periods can be detrimental to emotional, mental, and physical health.

Reconstructing Perceptions of Systemically Marginalized Groups in the Context of the United States

“Until affirmative action is described and understood as one mechanism by which to make amends for historical wrongdoing against members of marginalized communities, it will fail to meaningfully address the inequality that exists as a direct result of federal policy.” – Clint Smith, Author¹³

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Acknowledging and Addressing Deficit Perspectives in the Workplace

In recent years, the term “trauma-informed” has come to define the delivery of services informed by understanding trauma (the manifestations and ramifications of deficit perspectives in the workplace, included). Marking a significant cultural shift in the workplace, DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) providers—and relevant shareholders—are now regularly acknowledging and accepting the impacts of trauma in the US-based workplace and the importance of addressing traumatic stress in the workforce. This emphasis on recognizing and addressing deficit perspectives in the workplace means leaders and practitioners are now more likely to employ services focused primarily on the complex and often long-lasting impacts of deficit-perspective-induced trauma. Still, there are considerable limitations to enacting trauma-informed services. Traditional methods tend to underappreciate the substantial systemic factors related to trauma—the contextual elements and social structures that often create or exacerbate distress, particularly for members of marginalized groups. Providers, for example, may possess deficit frames and unintentionally reinforce systemic oppression by using traditional perspectives to define and address trauma. Acknowledging the systematic forces that engender or aggravate such trauma is essential. If not, these deficit perspectives cannot be righted. Worse, there will be no one to take social justice action, challenging the sociopolitical elements that harm those receiving such injustices.

A more comprehensive view of deficit-perspective-induced trauma begins with confronting and addressing the systemic and sociopolitical conditions that serve as barriers to a more socially just trauma-informed workforce. According to Goodman (2015), an ecosystemic view encompasses both direct and indirect experiences, including systemic oppression and generational trauma, to name a few. Goodman’s (2015) liberatory approach to reframing deficit narratives involves deconstructing the sociopolitical context as a component of daily practice, exploring and supporting different ways of healing, and orienting toward resilience and resistance (p. 55). Through approaches of this nature, DEIB and all other relevant stakeholders can interrogate their traditional frameworks (i.e., deficit perspectives) and work towards developing meaningful, socially just workplace practices, especially when collaborating with those who are members of marginalized communities.

Tangible Ways for all Stakeholders to Address Microaggressions in the Workplace

For the person on any end (recipient, aggressor, or witness) of *any* form of microaggression in the workplace, here are four strategic responses to consider in the effort to address/rectify the matter in real-time:

1. Think Before You Act

The best way to combat microaggressions is to think before you speak. Ask yourself, “could this comment be misunderstood or interpreted differently by this person?” If the answer is yes, think of another way to communicate your intentions.

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

2. Apologize

If you commit a microaggression, own up to it and apologize. Try not to get defensive, as this can worsen the situation and invalidate the receiver's feelings. Just admit that you were wrong and promise to do better next time.

3. Learn From Your Mistakes

Follow through on your promise to do better. Take time to educate yourself to ensure you do not microaggress someone else. Tangibles include reading helpful articles (like this one, for example!) or even taking a class where you can practice addressing microaggressions in a safe, non-punitive environment.

4. Commit to Building an Inclusive Workplace

Go a step further to develop a safe and inclusive work environment by calling out any microaggressions you notice and holding your colleagues accountable for their actions. This not only helps take the burden off the receiver to speak up, but it also sends a message that you are all looking out for each other and will not tolerate that type of behavior—whether intentional or not.¹⁴

Finally, it is worth noting the following key takeaways for those in positions of management, leadership, administration, and supervision¹⁵

- Remember that the word “ally” is a verb (i.e., an action word),
- Educate yourself about the everyday experiences of BIPOC employees,
- Provide employees with regular evidence-based unconscious bias and microaggression training,
- Create a formalized process for addressing microaggressions if and when they do occur,
- Address the offender before addressing the offended, and
- Reinforce that the psychological safety of BIPOC employees is important to you (i.e., model the behaviors you wish to see).

Why do these actions matter? They matter for multiple reasons. Firstly, they matter because it is important to treat one's colleagues and clients respectfully and not ostracize, insult, or demean them. Secondly, these actions matter because it is vital to building a high-performing, equitable workplace where unconscious bias is interrupted and minimized. Finally, these actions move the needle forward to right extant wrongs by actively confronting and reconstructing false perceptions of systemically marginalized groups in the workplace.

The Role of Human Resources in Eliminating Microaggressions in the Workplace

“Microaggressions in the workplace can threaten the emotional security, performance, and relationships to peers of its targets. Fostering an inclusive work environment is critical...as research indicates that strong feelings of belonging among employees are linked to a 56% increase in job performance and 50% drop in turnover risk.” – Jamie Birt, Career Coach¹⁶

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Microaggressions may not intentionally demean the recipient, but deliberate or not, it denies a person's unique personal and professional experiences. How, then, can human resources combat microaggressions in the workplace and the policies that perpetuate biases? Jill Thompson (2020), at the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), shares the following three ways HR can take the lead in helping to eliminate microaggressions in the workplace:

1. Educate Yourself and Your Team

Creating inclusive communities is an excellent way to educate oneself and one's team on what microaggressions look like and how they affect members of minoritized groups. Human Resource leaders can also access a plethora of resources, including microaggressions discussion guides, to facilitate conversations with their teams and better understand microaggressions in the workplace.

2. Call It Out

No issue will ever see resolution by sweeping it under the rug. Microaggressions must be called out in the workplace, whether they appear in the form of a statement made by a colleague or by way of a policy that perpetuates biases. Lean into uncomfortable conversations with offenders and let them know how their words or actions negatively affect the recipient. Further, confront aged policies that create structural obstacles for systemically marginalized people to thrive in one's organization.

3. Help Build a Diverse Workforce

Microaggressions are less likely to occur in a workforce that is made up of diverse individuals who understand each other's experiences. Building a successful, more inclusive workforce is vital to outfitting HR professionals with the knowledge and resources necessary to build a more inclusive workforce. (pp. 2–3)

For the most part, efforts to reconstruct false narratives remain under-actualized, and implementation of change-based actions is generally isolated and disproportionate. Reconstructing perceptions of systemically marginalized groups in this context involves leaders' ability to recognize the tremendous potential. Lasting benefits include increased engagement and employee retention, more commitment and connection to one's workplace as a meaningful entity, and improved morale across all sectors.

In this vein, stress, the body's natural response to changes that cause and create taxing demands, is also relevant. Thomas et al. (2021) define work-related stress as "the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope" (p. 9). To that end, Arroyo-Ramirez et al. (2018) acknowledge that:

Allyship is tricky to navigate, and everyone makes mistakes while trying to support one another; though allyship should not be the same thing as sycophancy. The authors of this article believe the role of the ally is to do the best they can to listen, to learn, to self-educate, and to keep the focus on the person or group they are meant to be supporting. Learning how to be a true ally or partner is a multistep [and] nonlinear process. (p. 125)

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

In short, because commonplace indignities will, over time, make the receiver feel devalued and unappreciated and communicate unconscious biases, systemic change can only come about by not being complacent or complicit. Reducing the factors that trigger or create stress matters; a workforce of diverse individuals who understand each other's experiences will undoubtedly go a long way to mitigate microaggressive behaviors and the stress these actions cause.

Key Takeaways for All Stakeholders

“You can choose courage, or you can choose comfort, but you cannot have both.” – Brené Brown, LLC¹⁷

In the ongoing effort to actively address the impact and repercussions of microaggressions, Foste and Ng (2021), Niemann (2021), and Thomas et al. (2021) present institutional leaders and administrators with the following suggestions [adapted from the Workplace Microaggressions Inventory (WMI)]:

1. Plan regular meetings of underrepresented groups with higher-ups to maintain open and ongoing dialogue on the topics of microaggressions, opportunities, and equal access,
2. Organize regular networking meetings of underrepresented employees across different spectra,
3. Manage workloads, evaluations, and performance appraisals to ensure fairness to eliminate discrimination, microinequities, and “glass ceilings,”
4. Outline the expectations and explicit requirements for promotion to provide transparency in the review process of all employees,
5. Listen to underrepresented colleagues and help prepare them for the challenges of working in a White-majority organization, including adverse risks of being pigeonholed in the areas of diversity, multicultural matters, LGBTQ issues, and social justice,
6. Appoint members of diverse groups to all critical oversight committees,
7. Cultivate a positive, supportive, welcoming, and cooperative institutional environment that facilitates productivity and advancement for all employees,
8. Provide resources to support the professional development of all underrepresented employees and promote their success,
9. Extend mentoring programs with qualified mentors to include all underrepresented employees, and
10. Infuse accountability oversight and monitoring into all programs and initiatives to evaluate the attainment of outcomes within established timelines.

Continued emphasis on the experiences of microaggressions on marginalized constituents may improve our collective understanding of its true and lasting impacts. How they influence a person's health and overall well-being helps shed light on how discrimination and deficit-based frames continue to affect the lives of marginalized groups.

Zamudio-Suaréz (2016) adds that an organization's offices of diversity, professional development, and training should coordinate workshops emphasizing these same outcomes. Moreover, the following guidelines (Foste & Ng, 2021; Niemann, 2021) include ten action steps, offering executives the opportunity to implement and foster robust professional development programs, beginning with an initial assessment, measuring all constituents' implicit biases and exposure to microaggressions:

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

1. Increase stakeholders' knowledge and awareness of microaggressions,
2. Enhance all members' knowledge and appreciation of people's differences and their importance to an individual's identity,
3. Understand the severe physical and psychological consequences of microaggressions to the victims,
4. Identify their implicit biases and prejudices to take immediate action to improve,
5. Appreciate the value and status of all employees at all levels of the organizational hierarchy,
6. Work to raise their sensitivity levels to recognize microaggressions when they occur,
7. Serve as an effective ally and advocate for colleagues who are the targets of microaggressions,
8. Select the appropriate strategies for the aggressor and victim to respond to microaggressions,
9. Formally document all incidents as the aggressor or victim for accountability; and
10. Be an intentional change agent to actively reduce and eliminate microaggressions (Berk, 2017b, pp. 72–73).

Ultimately, these and other action steps matter because diverse teams tend to perform higher than homogeneous groups.

Moving forward, Davis et al. (2020) remind us of “the overarching lesson [which] is that we are all immersed in, and must never imagine ourselves as being above, the emotional consequences of living within mixed sets of inevitable and chosen identities” (p. 358). In the effort to reconstruct perceptions of systemically marginalized groups, this is a critical reminder of the impacts, great and small, long- and short-term, of microaggressions on a person's life course and overall quality of life. Thus, shareholders are encouraged to lead the way as we continue to work toward cultivating equitable, inclusive, high-performing workspaces because it is the right thing to do.

Recommendations for Future Directions

“When you're the only minority in the room, you become keenly aware of the responsibility that comes with it.” – Vonetta Young, “Notes on Microaggressions From a Black Woman in Finance.”¹⁸

For too long, the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of those labeled “other” have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal workplace settings. These elements perpetually factor into all collective spaces in the United States, a nation with a storied history. Eurocentric perspectives and epistemologies continue framing the lives of those who do not reflect the norm. In the workplace, these frames generally establish the behaviors that count as “acceptable” and “appropriate” in these settings. Recognizing the ideologies of historically marginalized people as holders and creators of knowledge allows us to include more suitable frames and lenses that foster inclusivity in and out of the workplace. The furtherance of epistemologies that reframe false deficit narratives hold lasting implications for research and practice specific to today's multicultural, pluralistic US-based workplace.

Studies in this arena reveal that microaggressions, while seemingly inconsequential, have significant ramifications for marginalized groups in our society because they:

1. Assail the mental health of recipients (Torino et al., 2018),
2. Create a hostile and invalidating campus climate (Solórzano, 2020),
3. Perpetuate stereotype threats (Nadal et al., 2021),
4. Create physical health problems (Williams et al., 2021),

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

5. Saturate the broader society with cues that signal the devaluation of social group identities (Layous et al., 2017),
6. Lower work productivity and problem-solving abilities (Kunst et al., 2022; Rees & Salvatore, 2021), and
7. Contribute and amplify inequities across all sectors (Layous et al., 2017).

Far from simple slights, microaggressions can and do have detrimental outcomes for members of any marginalized group (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, 2022).

The resultant residuals are necessary to note, particularly in light of Paluck et al.'s (2021) work, reviewing 12 years (2007-2019) of prejudice reduction work, progress, and challenges in the United States. The authors saw rapid growth in research evaluating methods for reducing prejudice in the workplace, and they call attention to noteworthy landmark studies, pointing to sustained interventions, progressive measurement, and transparency. However, three-quarters of all included studies evaluated interventions for which long-term impacts were unclear. Although optimistic, the authors identified areas in which effects were sometimes exaggerated. They concluded that much research effort is theoretically and empirically ill-suited to provide actionable, evidence-based recommendations for reducing prejudice in the workplace. The work involved in addressing microaggressions, reconstructing perceptions of systemically marginalized groups, and being a good ally is substantial, to say the least.

Literature and rigorous quantitative and qualitative research on this topic are emergent. Moreover, more overt interventions intended to teach people how to respond to microaggressions and to cope with their adverse effects are needed (Bartlett, 2017; Chang et al., 2019; Lilienfeld, 2017). These actions include conversation-building around the following six themes:

1. The significance of explicit vs. implicit bias,
2. Action steps to increase diversity and decrease microaggressions,
3. Guidelines for professional development and training workshops,
4. How to respond to microaggressions (as a victim),
5. How to respond to the responsive victim (as an aggressor), and
6. How to use microaffirmations to block microaggressions (Berk, 2017b, p. 72).

The potentially negative and far-reaching consequences and risks of inaction justify pursuing specific actions, these included, at both the individual and organizational levels (Friedlaender, 2018; Proctor et al., 2018; Paluck et al., 2021). The insensitive statements, questions, or assumptions aimed at traditionally marginalized identity groups, known as microaggressions, can happen to anyone of any background or professional level. The research is clear about seemingly innocuous statements' effects on one's physical and mental health, especially throughout an entire career. These include but are not limited to upticks in trauma, depression, prolonged stress, physical concerns like headaches, high blood pressure, and sleep-related difficulties. Improving upon our responses to microaggressions—and being more aware of our everyday language use—is a journey, one with real impacts on our mental health and well-being in the workplace.

Microaggressions can and do affect everyone, so creating more inclusive, culturally competent workplace cultures means we must explore our own biases to become more aware of them. The goal is not to be fearful of communicating with one another but to embrace the opportunity to confront complicated

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

topics intentionally. Creating inclusive cultures where people can thrive will not happen overnight. This continuous process requires a commitment to interminable learning, evolution, and advancement.

CONCLUSION

“I do not use ‘microaggression’ anymore... I detest its component parts — ‘micro’ and ‘aggression.’ A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor. I use the term ‘abuse’ because aggression is not as exacting a term. Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide.” – Ibram X. Kendi, Author¹⁹

In the context of the United States, organizations are microcosms of American society in that much of the nation’s issues are reflected and reinforced in the collaborative work environment (Bridgeforth, 2017; Gorski & Parekh, 2020). It is important to note that these spaces offer ripe opportunities to advance multicultural equality, increase diversity, and develop societal equity (Delpit, 2018). Administrators across all sectors must exercise leadership that prioritizes increasing the number of faculty reflective and representative of the population at large. In this way, we take steps toward establishing organizational climates and cultures that nurture and support people of all backgrounds (Friedlaender, 2018; Nordmarken, 2022; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2018). We contend that this begins with the active and intentional work involved in addressing microaggression-inducing behaviors that persist systemically and systematically in the workplace.

Dr. Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, asks, ‘What can well-meaning allies and bystanders do to disarm and dismantle microaggressions they observe?’ In conjunction with the research team at Columbia University Teachers College, they have been studying and developing anti-bias education and training strategies called microinterventions. Microinterventions are “the everyday anti-bias actions that can be taken by targets, parents, significant others, allies and well-intentioned bystanders to counteract, challenge, diminish or neutralize individual and systemic expressions of prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination” (Sue et al., 2019, p. 134). As a result of their work, they were able to organize microinterventions into four strategic, overarching goals:

1. Make the “invisible” visible,
2. Educate the perpetrator,
3. Disarm the microaggression, and
4. Seek outside support and help [see Sue et al. (2019), *Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders*].

In sum, again, reconstructing perceptions of systemically marginalized groups begins with acknowledging the existence of deficit perspectives that continue to threaten forward progress in the workplace. Across various arenas (e.g., research, theory, training programs, workforce preparation programs, statistical data, and media portrayals), marginalized groups continue to work on “countering” false narratives.

The continued work to increase access for all involves building awareness, changing – and confronting – deficit narratives, and taking advantage of all opportunities to promote DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging) within the work culture and environment. Our goal with this piece is to disrupt the implicit deficit-based narratives that remain pervasive in today’s workplace. To mitigate the residual

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

effects of everyday “isms” on the work productivity and quality of life of those on the receiving end, we implore all institutional leaders to take an initiative-taking role in reducing microaggressions in the professional sphere.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Implicit Bias: Also known as *implicit social cognition*, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases differ from apparent biases in that individuals may choose to conceal them for social and/or political correctness. Instead, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.

Macroaggressions: Are microaggressions (see definition below) 'writ large' – more specifically, this term references the clear, conspicuous, stark, and overwhelmingly public displays of verbally aggressive slights. Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication.

Microaffirmations: Apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but highly effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed. These include the tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, graceful acts of listening, practicing generosity, consistently giving credit to others, and providing comfort and support when others are in distress.

Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

Microaggressions: The brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication.

Microassaults: Explicit denigrations, primarily characterized by verbal and/or nonverbal attacks. These attacks are meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, and other purposeful, discriminatory behavior.

Microinequities: Describe the pattern of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued because of one's race or gender. Microinequities are often unconsciously delivered as subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as innocent and innocuous.

Microinsults: Characterized by communications conveying rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's heritage or identity. These are often represented by subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, yet they clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient.

Microinterventions: Defined as the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate to recipients of microaggressions (1) validation of their experiential reality, (2) value as a person, (3) affirmation of their identity, (4) support and encouragement, and (5) reassurance that they are not alone.

Microinvalidations: Classified as a form of microaggressions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person or a particular group of people.

ENDNOTES

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- 6 <https://www.deltagamma.org/blog/the-impacts-of-microaggressions?fbclid=IwAR1-Hhf8wj-FIOmPnQ1BZmmA0bgY9GWmwHjwsWrkU7PpcalbPjurMIpZ3E04>
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Analyzing and Managing Microaggressions in the Workplace

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